

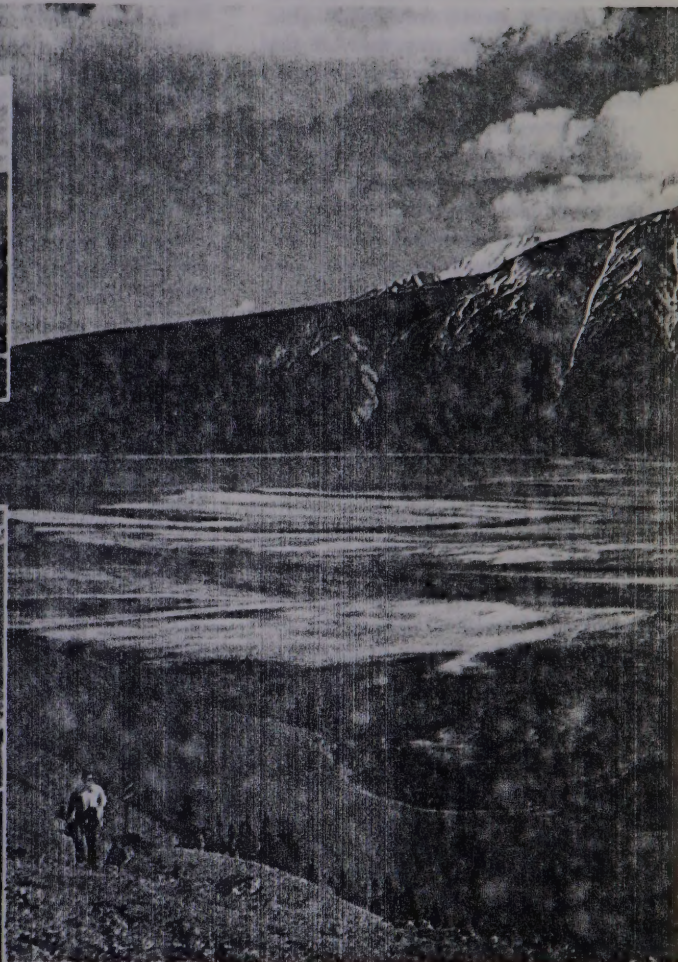


Along the Gold Dust Trail

by Yvette Cardozo



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While two vacationers explore the stark beauty of Kluane Lake, others exhibit their catch at Carcross or pan for gold in Bonanza Creek

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"Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold!"
"Stacks of Yellow Metal!"
The headline in the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* screamed this news on July 17, 1897 and followed with a story on the docking of the steamship *Portland* in Seattle. It told of the 68 passengers whose pockets, bags and trunks overflowed with gold. When the booty was assayed and weighed, it totaled more than two tons of nuggets.

This news began one of the maddest scrambles in North American history. In two or three years, 100,000 mostly greenhorn prospectors were to pour into the Yukon near the Arctic Circle looking for their pot at the end of the rainbow.

To get a feel for this era, you should retrace the gold dust trail. The place to start is Skagway, Alaska. Far south of the main body of Alaska, Skagway is the last stop on the long Inside Passage, which snakes through the breathtakingly beautiful islands off the west coast of Canada.

What you'll find here is a small collection of wood buildings and dusty gravel streets. Most of the town is part of a preserve named, appropriately, the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park. The visitor center sits in what was once the Arctic Brotherhood Hall, a building whose facade is made of over 20,000 finger-sized pieces of driftwood.

Skagway is a living museum. Everywhere you turn, there are old dog sleds on display and bits of clothing, pictures of the way it was, and occasionally an old-timer whose parents remembered.

From Skagway, the stampeders travelled nearly 600 miles overland to the gold fields in Dawson City. The hardest part of the trip was at the beginning, over the Chilkoot Pass. The Royal North-West Mounted

Police eyed the tenderfeet (called *cheechakos*) and decreed that each man would have to haul enough food and gear over the pass to last a year. It came to 2,000 pounds and most had to do it on their backs, a couple of hundred pounds at a time to Lindeman Lake 33 miles away.

The final climb to the 2,900-foot summit is a 40-degree slope so steep you can stand and touch the wall before you without losing your balance. Of all the memories carried out by those prospectors the winter of 1897-8, perhaps the most vivid was of the unending line of black specks arching up and over the mountain—men back to nose against each other, hauling hundreds of pounds and afraid to so much as step out for a rest because it would take hours to squeeze back into line. Of the 100,000 who set out from Skagway, only 30,000 were able to launch boats from Bennett Lake when the ice broke the next spring.

Today, the three-to-five-day Chilkoot Pass hike is a popular one. Books and pamphlets spell out points of interest, almost yard by yard. Rangers patrol along the way. Pots and pans, boots, sleds and even a cookstove lie along the trail where they were dumped or lost nearly 85 years ago. It is a treasure trove for history buffs and ghost town addicts, though park rules spell out that this is look and perhaps touch, but don't take. The hike is rough but not impossible. The main problem is weather, which can blanket hikers with snow in winter and drench them with rain in summer.

If hiking is beyond your interests, there is the newly completed Klondike Highway from Skagway to Whitehorse, or better yet, the White Pass & Yukon train. The south side of the

mountain range out of Skagway is green, dense and moist. Just below White Pass, it's as if someone drew a line with a knife. The trees end abruptly, to be replaced with granite rocks whose crevices are lined with snow much of the year. It is a monotone of grays softened only by patches of moss and the fog of low-hanging clouds. Then the train dips again through a tunnel and into Canada. The clouds with their moisture are stopped at the pass, and to the north there are vast alpine meadows and tiny lakes.

The train stops for a prospector's lunch of meaty beef stew, beans and apple pie at Lake Bennett, and again briefly at a tiny village named Carcross (for Caribou Crossing) before making its way to Whitehorse.

If you happen to be doing this trip by car instead of train, don't miss Carcross. It's there you'll find the graves of Skookum Jim and Tagish Charley, who along with George Carmack started the Klondike gold rush by discovering those first nuggets in Bonanza Creek. Here too you'll find the squawking replacements for Polly. The old parrot was reputedly 120 years old when she died in 1972. She lived in the Caribou Hotel for 50 years, startling those who dared offer her a cracker by screeching, "Go to hell!"

From Carcross, it's 40 miles to Whitehorse, whose 15,000 people make up nearly two-thirds of the Yukon's population. You don't get a feel for the emptiness of the Yukon until you realize that only 24,000 people live on 186,000 square miles . . . an area nearly the size of Texas. Only 145 miles of road in the entire territory are paved.

Whitehorse today is a relatively

Echoes of the Klondike in Canada's Yukon

Getting There

Half the fun of the Yukon is getting there. By today's instant jet standards, it might be considered a touch wearying but that's nothing compared to the hazardous, often fatal trips endured by gold stampedeers at the turn of the century.

First, of course, you can drive. The 1,523-mile Alaska Highway is mostly gravel but surprisingly smooth and well-maintained. Locals habitually average 70 mph with the biggest dangers being cracked windshields (from ricocheting pebbles) and the ever-present dust.

Probably the most popular way to reach the Yukon is by cruise ship up the Inside Passage to Skagway (approximately \$900 for one week). From there, you take the White Pass & Yukon, a narrow-gauge railroad which parallels the scenic gold stampede route over the mountains (\$60 including lunch) to Whitehorse. A tip: from Skagway, sit on the left side of the train.

For those who want to get directly to the Yukon, the most practical route is by air to Vancouver or Edmonton (Air Canada, Pacific Western and Western Airlines serve both cities) and then by CP Air or Pacific Western to Whitehorse. From there, one takes Trans North Turbo Air (\$250 round-trip) to Dawson. Bus is \$90 round-trip.

Summer temperatures are relatively mild—70s and 80s during the day but dropping to the 50s during twilight that passes for night.

A word of warning about prices: nothing in the Far North is cheap. "It's the freight," the locals explain. Whatever the reason, hotels run from \$45 to \$80 double for strictly functional quarters. The real shock, though, comes with the food bill. One breakfast special (juice, egg, bacon, potato, toast, coffee) ran \$5.50 and dinners in Dawson can easily cost \$20 apiece for adequate but certainly not gourmet food.—Y.C.

tame town where most of the Yukon's 300,000 yearly tourists stop to buy gold nugget jewelry and Indian trinkets before catching the Frantic Follies show. Even the ram-paging Yukon River has been tamed. There's a fish ladder with windows through which visitors gape at salmon struggling upstream, and an electricity dam with a powerful out-flow. That's all which remains to mark a section of river once so wild, women and children were prohibited by law from riding boats through it. They had to walk the shores while the menfolk fought the rapids.

From here, it was a relatively uneventful river journey for stampedeers to Dawson City . . . a trip that can be made today by car (over the Klondike Highway), by river raft (guided by a number of expedition companies) or by air.

But the cruel irony for those early prospectors was that after suffering the Chilkoot Pass and the Whitehorse Rapids, few got the riches they craved. Most of the valuable ground around Dawson had been claimed that first winter after the initial strike before word got out.

The original gold rush ended in the early 1900s. Then came the big companies, which stuck it out until the fixed \$35-per-ounce price of gold made work too expensive. In the 1960s, there were only nine independent miners working scattered claims.

But now, with gold prices higher, there are 200 active large operations. All 6,000 placer claims within a 60-mile radius of Dawson are in good standing. Over at the local bank, one of the teller's windows deals not in money but gold dust.

Tourists who come expecting to cash in on the new rush will find they're like the stampedeers of '98—far too late. But they can still get a feel for the hunt. Poverty Bar is the only commercial mining operation open to the public. Tourists come by bus to slosh in a trough at \$5 per pan of gravel. Owner Jeri Weigand swears she doesn't salt the pans but somehow, everyone finds seven or eight of the glittering flakes.

Two miles up Bonanza Creek, the Klondike Visitor's Association has

opened a free stretch to the public; all you need is your own pan. It is fun to give it a go, though locals say the area's been sifted dry for 80 years.

As for the town of Dawson, today it is a gathering of 1,000 people whose wood buildings sometimes sag under the strain of surviving winters where temperatures can sink to 60 below zero Fahrenheit for weeks on end. In 1979 just before the summer season, a devastating flood covered the town and in 1980, work on new plumbing lines left the dirt streets gouged with trenches. From the air, you can see mounds of tailings (worked-over earth) left by the large-scale mining operations of the past. They stretch almost as far as the eye can see like brown caterpillars oozing along the Yukon and Klondike Rivers.

But even with this roughness, the special electricity of the place comes through. The charm of the Yukon, and especially Dawson, is its genuine lack of airs. The real frontier isn't homogenized in shiny Disneyland reds and blues. You know you're looking at real life, where yesterday and today are interwoven and things can still be tough.

One second-generation Yukoner talks about what real cold is like: "When it's 60 below and there's no wind . . . if it's real quiet, you should stand there and just breathe out. You'll hear a crackly sound. That's your breath freezing."

Summers are warm, but even then things are . . . well . . . different. Dawson is 150 miles from the Arctic Circle and during June, the sun simply does not set. It dips momentarily behind some mountains but the light never fades. And if you drive to the top of Midnight Dome in late June, you can watch the sun actually bounce off the horizon.

This 24-hour day does strange things to people. You'll look out a window at 11 p.m., say to yourself, "Ah ha! Six o'clock!" and actually not feel sleepy. People work and play hard during Yukon summers because what they cram into six months has to last them a year.

There's a kind of gentle craziness in Dawson. It's a place where reality and fantasy blend so that not even

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Mike Beedel



those who live there can tell where the playacting ends. For most of this century, Dawson has lived on tourism. Outsiders peer at Jack London's cabin and listen to Robert Service poems read by a local man dressed in turn-of-the-century clothes who sits in a rocking chair on the porch of the log cabin where Service wrote his poems.

But over at Diamond Tooth Gertie's, the gambling casino done 1890s-style for tourists, those are real miners covered with the grit of honest work who are downing drinks at the tables. And occasionally, those are real gold nuggets they're tossing as tips to the

A general store in Carcross retains its pioneer flavor

can-can dancers on stage.

Jeri Weigand at Poverty Bar has a replica of her famous nugget necklace. The largest chunk is 6½ ounces; the total weights 8½ ounces. Until recently, the real one sat there in the display case and Jeri delighted in dragging it out for people. The Mounties finally convinced her to stash it in a vault.

They have yet to convince ex-mayor Vi Campbell, who wanders around town wearing \$30,000 worth of nugget jewelry. The showpiece of

her baubles is a three-inch-wide bracelet studded solidly with tiny nuggets. No, she says laughing, she doesn't wear her jewelry when she's pulling weeds in the garden, only when she goes out of the house... to the grocery store, for instance.

Isn't she afraid someone will steal it? "Heavens no," she replies. "We know everyone in town and as for the tourists, where is a thief going to go? There's only one road into town and one road out."—END

For more information on the Yukon, contact Tourism Yukon, Box 2703, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada Y1A 2C6.

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